

LIFE AFTER DEATH: A STUDY OF THE AFTERLIFE IN WORLD RELIGIONS

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For millennia, issues concerning death and the afterlife have been a major motif in the scriptures of the world's great religions. In addressing this universal theme for *Life after Death: A Study of the Afterlife in World Religions*, the author appears to have selected students at the post-secondary school level as her target audience. Positive recommendations excerpted from the *Exository Times* and *Publishers Weekly* and printed in the book's front matter allude to the book's introductory status: "Whets the appetite for further study and provokes a reappraisal of one's beliefs about death and beyond" and "A substantive primer." In the preface, the author clearly defines the scope and approach of her book, describing it as "a simple introduction," without "detailed descriptions or exhaustive analysis of various eschatological concepts . . ."

The author has fulfilled her stated objective, namely, to furnish the reader with basic instructive material on death and the afterlife. The scriptural references with commentary that define the author's method in the first seven chapters provide sufficient food for thought to capture and maintain reader interest throughout.

The first seven chapters of *Life after Death* are devoted to an exposition of the afterlife in the teachings and traditions of seven religions: Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith. Chapters eight, nine, and ten are devoted to "Reincarnation and Transmigration," "The Near-Death Experience (NDE)," and "Religion and the NDE Phenomenon," respectively. A somewhat unusual feature of the book is the author's combining the study of eschatology with near-death experiences under one cover, but the parallels are strong enough to justify comparison. In chapters nine and ten (112–47), the author briefly discusses reincarnation and transmigration in preliterate societies (New Stone Age, Africa, South Pacific, Amerindian society), and transmigration in Western and Eastern thought (ancient Egypt, Hinduism, and Buddhism, in Orpheus, Philo of Alexandria, Kabbalistic Judaism, Gnosticism, and Christianity). Her treatment of near-death experiences includes a section called "Alternative Theories," which is a rejection of the views of some scientists and "medical professionals" (129–33) that NDEs are either "mental illnesses," "temporary chemical imbalances," "the effects of drugs and anesthetics," "autosopic hallucinations,"¹ or residual memories of birth. The final chapter draws parallels between scriptural accounts of life after death and the NDE.

The chapters on near-death experiences strike me as being cogently written. What these pages imparted to this reader—far beyond the usefulness of the arguments rejecting the scientific objections to NDEs, or the presentation of scriptural parallels with NDEs, or past historical accounts of them, unrecognizable until seen in the light of modern NDEs—was the "fictional" gift of hope. I say "fictional" because fiction relies heavily on imagination for the creation of endless possibilities, and hope also imaginatively creates endless possibilities, particularly in the context of life after death.

¹ The author explains that "during an autosopic hallucination, a person sees a completely convincing projection of his own image in front of him, as he might see any other person close by" (131). The author reports that "such mental self-projections" are often experienced by individuals suffering from epilepsy and migraine headaches.

Although too lengthy to reproduce in full here, these pages contain one of the most beautiful and illuminating accounts of the near-death experience contained in the literature. Cultural anthropologist Patrick Gallagher “was comatose for several weeks following a near-fatal car accident in 1976” (122). During this time, Gallagher experienced “a series of vivid, stunning NDEs.” Gallagher’s personal witness, so beautifully lucid, captures the bliss of liberation, fulfillment, and beatitude that scripture has enshrined as the promise of eternal life. These pages well convey what the British statesman, Henry Dundas, First Viscount Melville (1742-1811), said about the hope of eternal life: “It is the struggle of the soul, breaking loose from what is perishable, and attesting her eternity.”²

The author’s framework is basically that of comparative religion through which she interweaves the various individual manifestations of three particular religious phenomena: death, afterlife, and near-death experiences 1 (NDEs). Writing as a comparative religionist, the author generally uses the phenomenological-historical method in both its usual meanings: (i) to maintain a certain detached objectivity without destroying an underlying note of sympathy; and (ii) to examine the data in a broad historical perspective.

In a few passages, however, the voice of the engaged theologian, in contrast to the objective phenomenologist, slips into the text. These few passages highlight the ongoing difficulty experienced by Bahá’í scholars when they aim to write objectively about particular religious beliefs that are subjected to theological judgments in Bahá’í scripture. Before giving these passages further consideration, it might be worthwhile to digress momentarily with a brief explanation of the comparative method before commenting on how the author applies it in this book.

Two (often overlapping) methods in comparative religion have emerged since its inception with the pioneering studies of F. Max Müller (1823-1900):³ phenomenology and the history of religions. Serious scholars of comparative religion tended to view official theologies as being antithetical to their aims, but in practice some theologizing took place for those with a missionary outlook and for those who wished to reassert the exclusive claims of Christianity. In today’s world of religious pluralism, interfaith encounters, and interreligious dialogue, this tendency towards exclusivity has all but disappeared in the nonconfessional departments of religious studies, and, increasingly even in confessional ones. Understanding of the word *theology* has come full circle today, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s undefined expression “world theology”⁴ indicates a supraconfessional form of free intellectual inquiry into global faith practices and experience. I do not, however, use the term in this way below, but rather in its older sense of the official doctrine of an institutionalized religion—in this case, the Bahá’í Faith.

On the one hand, the phenomenology of religion—always a slippery term⁵—pursued two avenues of approach: (i) phenomenology purported simply to describe religious phenomena in

² Tryon Edwards, ed., *The New Dictionary of Thoughts* (New York: Standard Book Company, 1960) 279.

³ The Anglo-German Orientalist (comparative philology, mythology, Indian philosophy) Max Müller wrote *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873), an early foundational work in “comparative theology.” He also wrote a collection of essays, *Chips from a German Workshop*, and *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature* (1859). His greatest achievement is generally considered to be his editorship of *The Sacred Books of the East* in fifty-one volumes, including indexes. One of his sayings is frequently quoted in comparative studies: “He who knows one, knows none” (Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* [London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1873] 16).

⁴ From the title of Smith’s book *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981).

⁵ Reinhard Pummer, quoting Th. van Baaren and C. J. Bleeker, says in a very detailed article on the history of the discipline of religious studies and its terminology that the history of religions as phenomenology “studies religion as

“value. neutral” fashion, but in practice maintained either a tacit or open sympathy toward the objects of its study; or (ii) phenomenology engaged in an in-depth search for meaning by looking for essences or universals in religion or interpretations of the human experience of the divine. The history of religions, on the other hand, not only examined religious phenomena in the developmental perspective characteristic of the historical approach, made careful note of cultural influences, and studied religious texts closely but also turned to a number of specialized auxiliary disciplines such as philology, cultural anthropology, mythology, literary criticism, psychology, sociology, and philosophy to render comparative religion more rigorous and “scientific.” These auxiliaries in time became full-fledged subdisciplines. Thus, comparative religion required not only the recovery of hard data but also hermeneutical skills that involved, among other things, the interpretation of myth and symbol.

Particularly, the author’s treatment of reincarnation and transmigration highlights the methodological inconsistency alluded to above. For example, in her conclusion to the discussion on the transmigration of souls (119–20), an unexpected twist occurs when the author makes an argument *in favor of* the belief in the transmigration of souls. While such an approach is not inconsistent with the identification-sympathetic mode of phenomenology, it is precisely here that the committed theologian versus detached scholar dilemma, or believer versus scholar conundrum emerges. Regrettably, the author does not mention that Bahá’í theology rejects transmigration and reincarnation, thereby placing herself in an ostensible “conflict of interest” with her own belief system. For it seems untenable that a Bahá’í *qua* believer engage in conscious selectivity or omission of a Bahá’í teaching because it might give offense or run counter to the arguments that the same Bahá’í is presenting *qua* scholar.

Even though the author cites a Pauline text that “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (Hebrews 9:27), which may be taken as a rejection of transmigration and reincarnation, at least from a Christian point of view, and although she writes that “most orthodox Christians have vigorously opposed it through the ages” (119), there is no mention of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s strong arguments against reincarnation. These arguments include His statement that certain of the views of reincarnationists constitute “child’s play” (*Some Answered Questions* 286) and the even stronger charge of “ignorant superstition” (288).

If the author is not theologizing against reincarnation based on the text from Hebrews cited above, one wonders why no mention is made of the anti-reincarnationist stance taken by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, particularly in light of the lengthier presentation of the chapter outlining the Bahá’í perspective (89–111). While the Bahá’í view rejecting reincarnation may be inferred from the presentation of various other Bahá’í texts, one may wonder if the author has bypassed Bahá’í theology in a laudable attempt at objectivity and value-neutrality. Clearly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, as the authorized interpreter of Baha’u’llah’s teachings, was not value-neutral on the question of reincarnation, but value-committed, that is, committed to truth as He understood it.

a cultural phenomenon, without making metaphysical or *weltanschauliche* statements” [perceptual statements about the world]. “*Religionswissenschaft* or religiology” in *Numen* 19.2-3 (1972):101. Yet it is very clear to anyone who has read *Phenomenology of Religion: Eight Modern Descriptions of the Essence of Religion*, Joseph Dabney Bettis, ed. (London: SCM Press, 1969) that phenomenology cannot avoid ascribing value and meaning to the religious experiences of humanity. W. Brede Kristensen’s essay “What is Phenomenology?” made the point, as did W. C. Smith and Huston Smith after him, that students and scholars must identify with the faith of others to such an extent that they “must therefore be able to forget themselves, to be able to surrender themselves to others” (49). This hardly sounds like detached objectivity. So we are left with this term *phenomenology* as meaning both objectification and identification.

There are a few other passages in which the voice of the “objective” comparative religionist is momentarily stilled, and the voice of the engaged theologian is heard. The apologetic tone is sounded in the author’s description of the Bahá’í interpretation of the symbolic language of eschatology in the other great world’s religions (104–9) as well as in her brief mention of Bahá’u’lláh’s truth claim (105). The author writes: “Perhaps the most significant contribution of Bahá’í eschatology lies in its rejection of literal interpretations of afterlife concepts” (108). The author goes on to explain that “Bahá’í beliefs about the purpose of this life and the nature of the next are *radically different* from those of most other religions” (emphasis mine) (108). How so? The argument the author makes to support such a statement is not really convincing.

Using Christianity as her sole example of “most other religions,” the author depicts Christians as believing in “celestial stasis” (108). This expression means that faith in Christ confers salvation for once and all time and absolves Christians of the work of spiritual transformation. Bahá’ís by comparison—and here she relies upon an eloquent passage from John Hatcher’s *The Purpose of Physical Reality: The Kingdom of Names*⁶—are spiritual evolutionists (108–9, 59 in Hatcher). Her unqualified statement, however, contradicts the writings of such well-known theologians as the spiritual evolutionist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin or the prolific and contemplative Thomas Merton, and more recently by writers in the field of psychospirituality such as Thomas Moore and Scott Peck—Christians who all address the vital theme of spiritual transformation as arduous, developmental soul-work.

I question, moreover, whether Christ’s gospel teaching supports the notion of “celestial stasis.” To cite but one example, the brief two-verse parable of the kingdom of heaven as the growth of a mustard seed into a tree in which the birds of heaven come to lodge (Matt. 13:31–32) and referred to in other gospels, makes this clear. This parable can be taken to apply not only to the growth of the Kingdom of God on earth, or to the powers of the divine Manifestation, but quite plausibly to the individual’s spiritual growth as well.

The theologian’s voice is heard most loudly again in the “General Eschatology” section of the chapter on the Bahá’í Faith, in those passages dealing with the station and truth claims of Bahá’u’lláh. Ma’súmián writes:

For example, the Fourth Gospel proclaims that Jesus Christ was the judgment for humankind. Bahá’u’lláh not only confirms this but claims that He is the judgment for today’s humanity. Those who accept His revelation gain salvation and those who knowingly reject Him are among the lost. (105)

If the author has in fact abstained from quoting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s arguments against reincarnation, one wonders about the logic in including this statement, which regrettably is without qualification, thus making it sound absolutist and depicting Bahá’ís as exclusive salvationists who are tarred with the same old elitist brush.

Other truth claims come to mind, notably, Christ’s categorical and oft-quoted statement from John 14: 6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me,” and the “one way” unequivocal statement attributed to St. Paul in his letter to Timothy⁷: “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). One may wonder why Ma’súmián has not addressed the truth claims of Jesus, or Muhammad for that matter, with an accompanying conceptual analysis allowing such claims to co-exist or at least to benefit

⁶ Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1987.

⁷ Paul’s authorship of the pastoral letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) is contested.

from a rapprochement with those of Bahá'u'lláh. These examples are not intended to invalidate the whole tenor of the author's work, but they do point to the ongoing challenge Bahá'í scholars face when they attempt to write objectively about particular religious beliefs about which strong statements, for or against, are made in Bahá'í scripture.

This dilemma draws attention to the need for working out a conceptual framework or method in scholarly writing for dealing with those Bahá'í texts that take strong antithetical theological positions vis-à-vis particular religious beliefs (such as reincarnation, pantheism, incarnation theology, anthropomorphism, psychic phenomena, and polytheism). One means of solving this dilemma would be that suggested by John Hick in *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*⁸ and referred to by Bahá'í scholar Dann J. May in his article "The Bahá'í Principle of Religious Unity: A Dynamic Perspectivism."⁹ This is the mode of the metaphorical or mythological interpretation of a doctrine, which, taken literally, appears to be at odds with another (e.g., reincarnation versus the afterlife). Another means would be for Bahá'í scholars so inclined to begin to develop what might be called "responsible"¹⁰ or critical apologetics. Currently, the word *apologetic* appears to have provoked an identity crisis among Bahá'í scholars of religion, but it has a long and respectable history in both Christianity and Islam. While popular and apologetical approaches to the Bahá'í Faith may have been lacking scholarly rigor in the past, these approaches do not represent definitive or ideal forms of apologetics. This approach would make full use of modern scholarly resources and methods, while supporting the integrity of the positions taken in Bahá'í theology. It is important to stress that any apologetical approach applies not only to the Bahá'í Faith but also to all the revealed religions. It is risky, however, for a Bahá'í scholar to mix committed theological positions on some issues (Bahá'u'lláh's truth claims) and ignore others (reincarnation), while attempting in the same work to pursue an objective or "scientific" method along the lines of history of religions.

The above considerations do not discredit a book that is in other respects a worthwhile introduction to the topic. In the history of science, however, anomalies have led to breakthroughs or new paradigms. Likewise, attention must be drawn to anomalies in Bahá'í studies of religion so that new paradigms might also emerge.

⁸ New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989.

⁹ In *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Bahá'í Theology*, J. A. McLean, ed. (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1997) 1–36.

¹⁰ 10. In Proposition 6: "Responsible Apologetics" of an unpublished manuscript "Propositions on a More Comprehensive Theology," I have defined the word *responsible* to mean: (1) not autocratic; (2) capable of rational conduct; (3) respectable; (4) of good credit, position, or repute; (5) involving responsibility, as that of an office. Such definitions have their origins mainly in concepts, of statecraft or political office and, by analogy, point to the theologian as a responsible member of the community.